

COMMENTARY

CAN THE MIDDLE EAST BE HELD?

Why the West Cannot Work with Pan-Arabism

G. F. HUDSON

WHY should the Western world be involved in the Middle East? It cannot be taken for granted that it should be; indeed, it is politically dangerous to take it for granted, for unless the national policies of democracies, as framed by their governments, are related to objectives which are publicly understood, confusion may result when these policies run into difficulties and someone asks the question whether they are really worth while. There is additionally the fact that over the last three years the policies of the United States, Britain, and France toward the Arab world have been so divergent as not merely to thwart one another locally, but even to strain the solidarity of the North Atlantic Alliance. If the three principal Western powers are to act in concert instead of sepa-

ately and in disarray, they must clearly recognize the nature of one another's purposes in the region and find the greatest common measure of interest on which to stand, in the face of the obvious Soviet intention to exploit their differences.

To begin at the beginning, there is oil. It is true that quite recently learned treatises have been written on Middle Eastern affairs in which oil has barely been mentioned. In some quarters concern about oil is still considered disreputable; it suggests a prevalence of sordid motives in Western relations with Middle Eastern countries, and it does not belong to the tradition of romantic Orientalism which perpetuates the old glamorous Moslem world of pashas and sheikhs, minarets and camels. Historically, of course, Britain and France were actively interested in the Middle East long before petroleum was sought or discovered there; as European commercial powers they had their stakes in the general trade of the area, and they had their strategic rivalries with each other closely related to their conflicts in Europe; later there was also the British aim of preventing a southward expansion by Russia athwart Britain's imperial communications with India. British involvement in southern Arabia dates from the wars of the French Revolution when the French for a while held Egypt; Cyprus was annexed in 1878 as part

THE political upheaval in the Middle East, touched off by the military coup in Iraq, has once more focused public attention on the danger of Russian and Pan-Arab interference with the West's oil supplies. In this article, written shortly after the American and British landings in Lebanon and Jordan, a noted expert forecasts the gradual expulsion of Western influence from most of the oil-producing countries and advocates a policy of defending the Mediterranean seaboard from Turkey to Israel. G. F. HUDSON, director of the Center for Far Eastern Studies at St. Antony's College, Oxford, is a regular contributor to COMMENTARY.

of a bargain to guarantee Turkey's territory in Asia against Russia; Egypt was occupied in 1882 primarily because of the strategic importance of the Suez Canal. French intervention in North Africa goes back to early 19th-century operations against the Barbary corsairs, and later both Tunisia and Morocco became fields of European rivalries.

But with the advent of the oil age all previous motives for European concern with the Middle East were dwarfed into insignificance. Since the Middle Eastern region was found to contain the greater part of the world's oil reserves it has become a source of supply on which the economic life of Europe is vitally dependent. Since Europe, unlike the United States and the Soviet Union, is not self-supplying in oil, it could be strangled economically if it were cut off for any length of time from the oil fields of the Middle East. This might be regarded in Washington as a purely European concern if America were still isolationist; but the North Atlantic Alliance has made the security of Europe a matter of vital concern to America. In consequence any threat to the flow of Middle Eastern oil now endangers both the eastern and the western halves of the Atlantic alliance, even though the United States (with Texas and Maracaibo to meet its needs) cannot appreciate the implications of an oil famine as acutely as the nations of Europe.

THE significance of this economic factor is best grasped if we suppose that no oil had ever been found in the Middle East or North Africa, and that Europe drew virtually all its supplies from, let us say, Brazil. What then would there be in the Middle East of real consequence for the Western world? Very little. Apart from oil, the region as a whole, with its prevailing aridity, is one of minor importance in contemporary world economics. The Suez Canal would still be of importance as an international waterway, even if there were no oil tankers passing through it, but its importance has been greatly reduced, for Britain at least, by the transfer of sovereignty in India, which

has inevitably modified the old British conception of imperial maritime communications. Politically, France has its million settlers in Algeria, but Britain has no settlers in the Middle East, and the remaining British protectorates in Arabia would no longer represent any interest compelling for British policy were they not related to a regional strategy whose basic purpose is the safeguarding of oil supplies. In terms of a purely economic imperialism, no areas of the world are so worthless as the waterless crags behind Aden or the sand dunes of Oman.

In considering the Western interest in Middle Eastern oil, the question of profits must be clearly distinguished from that of supply. The classic theory of imperialism, which most Arab nationalists have now made their own, is concerned only with the profits made by the entrepreneurs of metropolitan countries who invest in colonial or semi-colonial countries, and with the rivalry of governments to secure for their nationals the most profitable opportunities for investment. It follows from such an exclusive attention to capitalist profits, in an analysis of the development of extractive industries in economically backward countries, that nobody in the metropolitan countries would suffer from the confiscation of these enterprises through local nationalist revolutions, except the shareholders in the investing companies. In economic theory, the nation which formerly exported the capital would still be able to buy the commodity in question, even though its nationals no longer make a profit from its production; in any case, as long as an underdeveloped country cannot provide the necessary capital and the requisite managerial and technical ability from its own resources, it must seek them from abroad, even though it may today insist on terms far more stringent than in the bad old days of concession-hunting.

The issue, however, is not merely an economic one—or rather it is an economic one which can become also political and strategic. If one country, or a group of countries which can be brought under a unified political control, has a near-monopoly in a com-

modity essential to the economic life of other countries, the power to supply or withhold that commodity can be used as an instrument of political blackmail. In developing the production of oil in the Middle East, the nations of Europe have become increasingly dependent on it for the functioning of their industry and transport. This dependence has nothing to do with the profits which their capitalists may derive from investment in the production of oil, and would be equally dangerous for these countries even if their economic systems were entirely socialist. It impels the governments of such nations to policies which have a certain superficial resemblance to the old imperialism, but which are quite different in motivation.

EUROPE could be deprived of its Middle Eastern oil supplies by three possible situations. The first might be direct Soviet military control of the oil-producing areas, as a result either of a conflict developing in the Middle East itself or of a war originating elsewhere—in Europe or the Far East. A second contingency is the formation of a confederacy of Arab states which would threaten to withhold oil supplies, or actually do so, in support of political demands on the West. The third is a combination of the first two possibilities—an anti-Western Arab coalition receiving Soviet military aid to an extent which would render it wholly subordinate to Soviet policy.

The first danger may be reckoned the least probable of the three. A direct Soviet military invasion of the Middle East, without the cover of invitation by one or more Middle Eastern states, would present a clear-cut case of aggression, provoke combined Western counter-action, and provide the best possible legal basis for it, since many Asian and Arab states would presumably rally against the aggressor and insure a two-thirds majority in the United Nations Assembly against the Soviet bloc. The risk of war on unfavorable political terms would thus be at its maximum for the Soviet Union, and the struggle would be only too likely to develop into a full-scale atomic war. If war had al-

ready started elsewhere, the Russians might indeed invade the Middle East as part of their general strategy; but if the war were already a nuclear one it would be likely to run its course before the interruption of oil supplies could have a decisive effect, while if it were fought with conventional weapons a major Russian military move into the Middle East would be a factor most likely to turn it into a nuclear one. It seems improbable, therefore, that the Soviet government would undertake direct and open aggression in the Middle East unless it was seeking a decisive showdown with the Western world, and that could be brought about just as well, or better, by aggravating the German situation.

But the Soviet Union is not dependent on direct and open aggression as the sole means of obtaining control of the Middle East; it has the possibility of attaining this end by exploitation of non-Soviet political forces within the region. An Arab confederacy capable of cutting off the greater part of Middle Eastern oil supplies would have to include Iraq, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia, as well as Egypt and Syria. The United Arab Republic, which already controls the Suez Canal and the pipelines to the Mediterranean, can interrupt the passage of oil supplies by the short route to Europe, inflict shortages and heavy costs on the European economy and compel the diversion of tankers round Africa; but it cannot bring about a complete stoppage of supplies as long as the countries which actually produce the oil are willing to sell. To bring Iraq, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia into close alliance with the United Arab Republic must therefore be the unceasing endeavor of the Pan-Arab nationalism which has its center in Cairo.

The goal of a single Arab national empire extending from the Persian Gulf (or the Arabian Gulf, as Cairo propagandists maintain it should be called) to the Atlantic is the political hammer with which the followers of Nasser seek to break down the separate sovereignties of the existing Arab states and create a new world power which would be a not unworthy successor

to the empire of the Ommayad caliphs. There are indeed formidable obstacles of local particularism and personal rivalries in the way of the realization of this ideal, but to an ever increasing extent all Arab rulers—whether kings, sheikhs or republican politicians—have to pay lip service to it, and Cairo radio has made it familiar in the most remote villages and nomad encampments, where people who as yet cannot read or write listen in to the superlatively managed broadcasting system created by the Nasser regime with the aid of ex-Nazi German technicians. Theoretically, the unification of the Arab world need not mean the ascendancy of Egypt, but in fact there is no effective rival to Egypt for leadership of the Pan-Arab movement. Bourguiba of Tunis, Hussein of Jordan, or King Saud may be unwilling to submit to the pretensions of Colonel Nasser, but none of them is capable of assuming that role of leader of the Arab world which the nationalist-indoctrinated younger generation requires to be assumed by someone.

THE difficulty in finding any reliable counterweight to Egypt in the Arab world lies in the fact that the Arab national idea is now stronger than any attachment to Syria, Iraq, or Saudi Arabia as separate states, and Arab nationalism in effect means attachment to Egypt. Thus, even where governments are prepared to resist Egyptian ascendancy, Egypt has its fifth column which may at any moment take advantage of some crisis in domestic politics to overthrow the existing government—with or without substantial aid from the United Arab Republic. In a prolonged period of peace and relaxation of international tensions, local interests would be likely to reassert themselves, the separate governments might consolidate their position, and the attainment of Arab unity might be indefinitely postponed. The Pan-Arab idea has its greatest appeal when issues which unite all or most Arabs in common enmities are emphasized at the expense of their parochial concerns. Hence it is to the interest of Nasser and the Pan-Arab ex-

tremists to keep the Middle East continually in a ferment, to provoke one crisis after another, and to prevent any stabilization.

Since Egypt is not itself an oil-producing country, the Egyptians have in any case a strong urge to lay their hands on the sources of oil in the Arab countries to the east of them and thus get a share of the revenues those countries derive in times of normal trade. But over and above the economic advantages to be derived in this way from an extension of Cairo's ascendancy to the Persian gulf, control of all the Arab oil fields through satellite authorities would provide Egypt with the immense political bargaining power implied in the capacity to restrict or cut off oil supplies. There are two obvious ways in which such power could be used to attain Pan-Arab political objectives: one would be to compel Britain and France to yield what remains of their protectorates or sovereign rights in Arab lands; the other would be to coerce the Western world into conniving at an Arab war to annihilate the state of Israel.

On the assumption, however, that the United Arab Republic could absorb by diplomacy, subversion, and guerilla violence the oil-producing areas of the Arab world, there would still be two points of weakness in the program. The first relates to the position of Iran (Persia) as an oil-producing but non-Arab state which is naturally unresponsive to the propaganda of Arab nationalism. As long as Iran remained outside the Arab confederacy there would be no monopoly of Middle East oil, even though the greater part of it would be in Arab hands. But if there has definitely been a revolution in Iraq (as we must assume in our hypothesis of Arab unification) and if, as must certainly follow, Iraq breaks away from the Baghdad Pact alliance, the situation in Iran would also become highly unstable. Iran is in itself a very weak country, and its membership of an international grouping for defense against the Soviet Union depends on the belief in Teheran that there is basically a balance of power in the Middle East which renders it not too

unsafe for Iran to pursue such a policy. But if Iraq were definitely to pass into the anti-Western orbit, Iran would regard it as a symptom of Western decline and would almost certainly seek reinsurance with Moscow. The Iranian Communists might then take power, and even if a non-Communist government was permitted to survive, its foreign policy would become subservient to direction from Moscow, and in a Middle Eastern crisis joint Soviet and Arab pressure would probably be sufficient to induce it to take part in an oil embargo.

The other main handicap to Pan-Arab ambition lies in the military weakness of the Arab states, even if they were to be combined. A Pan-Arab capacity to use oil supplies for political blackmail depends on the immunity of the Arab world from military intervention by the Western great powers. Egypt two years ago was quite incapable of defending her territory against the British and French expeditionary forces, or even against Israel alone; her "victory" in the Suez affair was brought about not by any Arab military action, but by the diplomatic support of both the Soviet Union and the United States, by the Soviet threat of intervention through "volunteers," by the voting in the United Nations, and by the strength of the political opposition to governmental policy inside Britain itself. Since the promulgation of the Eisenhower Doctrine, however, Nasser has had to reckon with the possibility that in a future conflict the United States, Britain, and France might be found acting in concert, and it would then be all the more essential to be assured of the protection of the Soviet Union in an emergency. A "forward" policy would thus become dependent on the support of the Soviet Union, which could curb it or stimulate it in accordance with the general line of Soviet foreign policy at any given time and the degree of compliance to Soviet wishes shown by the Arabs. Nor would it be only the need for security against unpleasant consequences of oilfield-grabbing or embargoes which would impel Nasser to rely more and more on Russian military support; any actual mili-

tary operations going beyond guerilla activity (for example against the British in the Aden Protectorate or Oman) and above all the intended war against Israel, would call for reinforcement of Arab military resources with Russian military technicians or even "volunteer" units. Provision of these in an actual war would give the Russians the grip on the Arab world which they so far lack, without involving Russia directly in the conflict or providing a sufficient pretext for Western "massive retaliation."

This applies above all to the hypothesis of a war against Israel. The promise of victory over Israel is one of the main elements in the Pan-Arab appeal: Arab unity is the condition for crushing Israel. In proportion as it is attained, the pressure for carrying out the project of an attack on Israel is bound to grow. "Union today; revenge tomorrow!" was the slogan shouted by the crowds in Damascus at the proclamation of the United Arab Republic, meaning of course revenge against Israel. The time will not be ripe until Jordan has been brought into line—an aim facilitated by the revolutionary overthrow of the old regime in Iraq. If the Pan-Arab cause were to prevail in Amman, as well as Baghdad and Damascus, Nasser could not long refrain from a new aggression against Israel. Success in a war against Israel would not only consolidate his position in the parts of the Arab world already under his rule, but would give him an irresistible prestige and ascendancy in all Arab lands. But success could not be gained easily, and nobody can be so well aware of the risks of a Palestine campaign as the Egyptian officers who had experience of fighting the Israeli army in 1956. There is thus a very strong temptation to look to the Soviet Union for the military aid which would insure victory over Israel.

HEREIN lies Moscow's great opportunity, which can be exploited according to a time schedule determined by the Soviet leaders. So far the Soviet Union has shown a marked caution with regard to military aid to the Arabs beyond the provision of arms

and technical instructors. In the Suez war of 1956 the Russian pilots of bombers supplied to Egypt flew them out of the country and made no attempt to use them in Egyptian service against the British and French; in the recent Lebanon-Jordan crisis the Russians stopped short of major direct military commitments to the United Arab Republic against the sudden American-British intervention. But it cannot be assumed from these precedents that the Russians will always be so cautious. Their action in a given case must be governed by a variety of considerations: not only their estimate of the risk of a serious conflict with the West, but also the degree of their satisfaction with the behavior of Egypt. It is not in Russia's interest to let the Arabs have their aid too easily, or to make it so regular that it is taken for granted; the Cairo politicians must be taught that Russian favor is not compatible with Egyptian attempts to make deals with America on the side. But if they have once learned their lesson (and the Soviet leadership is not averse to a period of tension in international relations) then Soviet military support for an Arab war against Israel would promise great gains for Russia. The Arabs would use the threat of an oil embargo to deter the West from any support for Israel, and Russia would gain such a military hold on the Middle East—particularly if the war were prolonged—that the oil could be used as an instrument of Soviet, no less than of Arab, policy.

Against these dangers Western diplomacy, as it is now pursued on traditional lines, is inadequate, a fact borne out by the recent events in Baghdad. Although the Syro-Egyptian attempt to subvert Jordan was frustrated, and the union of Egypt and Syria temporarily matched by the rival combination of Iraq and Jordan, the odds are now heavily in favor of the movement for Arab unification. As things stand, the successful Pan-Arab revolution in Iraq must upset the whole Western apple cart. It will disrupt the Baghdad Pact and tip the balance in the Arab world decisively in favor of Cairo; Kuwait will probably soon be swallowed

up, and with the Yemen already attached to the United Arab Republic, Saudi Arabia would tend to fall into line rather than risk isolation. The old British policy of backing Iraq against Egypt was conditional on a degree of political stability which has been shown up as deceptive; similarly, the American policy of making friends with the Saudi autocracy is vulnerable to the impact of the new forces in the Arab world, because even the authority of this most archaic of monarchies is not proof against the influences now emanating from Cairo.

EVEN in the petty kingdoms of southern Arabia which are under British protection and stand to lose their separate existence altogether in any Arab national unification, the tide of Arab nationalism has been running too strongly to be checked by the traditional methods of British indirect rule; in one of the Aden Protectorate states the ruler was deposed by a pro-Egyptian son, and in another a large part of the local Arab army defected to the Yemen, taking with it the money paid by Britain as a subsidy to the ruler. The signs are that no policy of bolstering up local monarchs and "strong men" as rivals to Nasser and barriers to the spread of Pan-Arabism is likely to avail the West for long. Nor can military intervention be relied on to prop up collapsing pro-Western governments or prevent them from going over to the other side. In the Aden Protectorate and in Oman the British have at least treaty rights to cover their military operations, but even in these areas military measures become increasingly difficult to justify, as local unrest begins to assume the character of a national revolt; and outside the British protectorates any Western intervention tends to run into embarrassing problems of legality.

The British and French action against Egypt in the autumn of 1956 aimed at getting rid of Nasser and imposing an international administration on the Suez Canal. Unfortunately for the attainment of these objectives, the British government was quite unable to find any pretext for the expedition which would make it anything but an ag-

gression against the sovereign state of Egypt, a member of the United Nations. The nationalization of the Suez Canal Company, an act within the sovereign jurisdiction of Egypt, and Egypt's refusal to accept any form of international control of the Canal, could not be invoked as a justification for war, and the claim that Britain and France were trying to separate the Egyptian and Israeli forces and stop the fighting was entirely unconvincing, since the campaign was plainly directed against Egypt. The British government, having persistently turned a blind eye to the fedayeen attacks on Israel, could not even avail itself of Israel's own claim of action in self-defense. Thus Britain and France were involved in an action which resembled the old-fashioned "gun-boat diplomacy" of the 19th century and was clearly a violation of the Charter of the United Nations.

THE Eisenhower Doctrine, as formulated by Washington after the Anglo-French fiasco, was designed to avoid the blunder of using force against Pan-Arabism without any legal justification. It was to be a purely defensive instrument. Any Middle Eastern state which asked for protection against the Soviet Union, or a state "under the control of international Communism," would be given military protection, but no state would be protected except by its own consent, and no action would be taken against any trouble-making state unless it committed an open act of aggression which, in the judgment of the President of the United States, was Communist-inspired. The Eisenhower Doctrine has now been put to the test in the Lebanon, and it cannot be said that it has been much more successful in frustrating the forces of Soviet-supported Pan-Arabism than was the ill-fated Suez policy of Britain and France.

In the first place there was no clear case of aggression; the crisis was primarily a matter of internal revolt, and though it was backed by the United Arab Republic with propaganda, arms, and some military infiltration, there was no external attack of a

kind which could clearly justify intervention to help Lebanon as a victim of aggression. On the contrary, any British or American action was liable to appear as an interference in Lebanese internal affairs. There was also the very ambiguous attitude of the Lebanese army and of many who were supposed to be government supporters. In the words of a newspaper correspondent in Beirut, "advice tendered to the President by Western diplomats has come up against the obstacle that nothing can be done (apparently) to get action out of the army." It became extremely difficult for the Western powers to propose taking military measures to help a regime which was so unwilling to help itself. The same situation is likely to arise in any other Arab country where Pan-Arab revolutionary subversion takes place; the obvious case of direct external aggression against which the Eisenhower Doctrine was to raise the shield of American power will probably not be forthcoming anywhere in the Arab world.

The situation which emerged in the United Nations was likewise adverse to any application of the Eisenhower Doctrine in the way originally envisaged. It was evident that, in the absence of regular military action by the United Arab Republic which would call for counter-action as a matter of urgency, the affair must come before the United Nations, but with the votes of a number of Asian and Arab states added to those of the Soviet bloc the two-thirds majority in the United Nations Assembly required to authorize intervention would be in doubt. In the Security Council the Soviet Union caused some surprise by abstaining, instead of using its veto on the proposal to send United Nations observers to the Lebanon-Syria frontiers, but this measure was an alternative to American-British intervention and in effect excluded it without providing any real security against further smuggling of arms to the rebels. In the outcome the "settlement" of the crisis by military intervention has been a further political setback for the West.

What then can be done to stop the drift in the Arab world towards a unification cen-

tered on Cairo under the sponsorship of the Soviet Union? A continuation of recent Western policies cannot be expected to stop it, because these policies have been based on radically false assumptions. It has been supposed that Arab nationalists were somehow reasonable people who could be persuaded that their true welfare lay in peaceful economic development with Western financial aid; who could be convinced that the Russian Communists were the real menace to the independence of nations; and who could be brought to see that the Western powers were their best friends in everything they wanted to do. But the Arabs, unlike the Turks and Iranians, have never had experience of Russian expansion, and continue to regard the British and French, and now also the Americans, as the real imperialist nations; they want the kingdom, the power, not economic development, and they look to Russia to help them achieve what they want above all—the destruction of Israel.

If the Western democracies try to compete with Russia in winning the affection of Arab nationalists, they are playing a game they cannot win. It is no use offering protection to states that do not want to be protected, where a friendly government is liable to vanish overnight, and defections of the armed forces can occur at any moment. It is equally useless to imagine that the anti-Western sentiments of the Arab world can be assuaged by avoiding any commitment to defend Israel, or even by holding out hopes of diplomatic pressure to lop off bits of Israeli territory; the Western democracies, because they are democracies, cannot be brought to the point of actively participating in the destruction of Israel, and that is what the Pan-Arab policy-makers expect of Russia.

IT FOLLOWS that the West must write off the Arab world as a region of friendly, or even neutral, countries. The French may still be able to re-establish a measure of influence in the North African Maghreb, which is more than half Berber and a long

way from either Israel or Russia. But the area from the Nile to the Tigris is likely to pass more and more into the Soviet orbit by "internal" shifts without any war of conquest which would provide the West with adequate grounds for forcible intervention. Against this process there are two things that the West can do to minimize the adverse effects on its economic and strategic position. One is for NATO to treat as of the highest priority the development (even at high cost in subsidies) of oil fields in areas outside the Middle East which would reduce the potential political blackmail inherent in the present situation of dependence of European nations on Middle Eastern supplies. There are oil-bearing tracts, such as the Athabasca sands in Canada, which it is at present uneconomic to develop, but which could be made productive by a combined financial effort of the NATO countries undertaken in good time.

The other main need for Western policy is to face the probability that the eastern end of the Mediterranean will soon become a frontier, and to concentrate on strengthening the two countries there which are friendly to the West, which are threatened either by Russia or by Pan-Arabism, and which can be relied on to resist with all their forces if attacked—that is to say, Turkey and Israel. Turkey indeed is already a member of NATO, but the idea of any association with Israel is still intolerable to the pro-Arab yearners of the British Foreign Office and the U. S. State Department, whose hopes of winning over Nasser (or alternatively building up rivals to Nasser) never seem to fade, however often their policies end in frustration and defeat. The course of events, however, must sooner or later drive the Western powers to recognize who are their friends and who their enemies; the only question is whether they will recognize it in time to draw concrete advantages from a revision of policy, or whether wisdom will only be forced upon them in an hour of crisis and panic.